



House And Senate Appropriators OK \$500 Million To Ensure
That Federal Firefighters Have The Resources Needed For
The Upcoming Fire Season
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WASHINGTON, D.C. – A House and Senate conference committee has approved \$500 million in emergency funding to ensure that federal firefighters have the resources they need this summer to face the severe fire threat caused by drought and insects in national forests in California and throughout the West, Senator Dianne Feinstein and Congressman Jerry Lewis announced Thursday.

The emergency funding was approved as part of the \$417 billion Department of Defense Appropriations bill that will be sent to the House and Senate floors for final approval next week. Congressman Lewis, R-Redlands, served as chairman of the House-Senate Conference Committee and Sen. Feinstein was a member of the committee.

“This vital funding, which will be available to spend as soon as the president signs the bill, will ensure that we are ready if we face devastating fires like those that occurred last fall in California,” said Lewis, the senior California Republican member of Congress. “This provides for the air tankers, helicopters, engines and fire crews that we may need to get through this upcoming dangerous season.”

“By including \$500 million of funding in the conference report approved by this committee, we will enable the funds to work as quickly as possible in order to protect our communities, which face a very significant threat this fire season,” Senator Feinstein said. “This money will provide firefighters with the tools they need to effectively combat wildfires and protect our communities from danger.”

Lewis praised the leadership of Congressman Charles Taylor of North Carolina, who has led the effort to provide the supplemental firefighting funds this year. As chairman of the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, Taylor convinced the House to approve the \$500 million in funds as part of the Fiscal Year 2005 Interior Department spending bill, which is awaiting consideration in the Senate. Lewis agreed to move the funds to the Pentagon spending bill because it is virtually assured of being approved before Congress goes into recess on July 23.

In recent years, the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have faced such heavy fire seasons that they have been forced to borrow funds from non-firefighting accounts to be able to pay for suppression. This inhibits the agencies’ ability to conduct vital land management duties and fund cooperative projects unrelated to firefighting. It also detracts from their ability to conduct hazardous fuels reduction projects and other efforts that help prevent forest fires in the first place.

Hazardous fuels reduction programs are especially urgent in Southern California, where drought and the pine bark beetle have killed an estimated 12 million trees. Lewis and Feinstein last

year secured \$150 million to create a comprehensive tree removal program for the Emergency Watershed Protection program of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. An additional \$50 million was secured for the U.S. Forest Service tree removal programs on federal land and private property with landowners' approval.

The fires that burned in California during October and November 2003 were among the most expensive disasters ever to hit the state. Insurance payouts alone are expected to cost more than \$3 billion, with public expenditures to fight the fires and recover from them estimated to run into the hundreds of millions of dollars. However, it is estimated that the fires only burned about 10 percent of the dead trees, leaving tinderbox conditions for the current fire season.

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